

John Adams

John Adams by David McCullough
(Simon and Schuster Paperbacks, 751 pp., \$11.49)
Reviewed by Al Todd

One of the most effective ways to engage people in the study of history is through biography. Most of us have read history (full disclosure: the reviewer was a History major in college) in what can be spectacularly boring books full of dry facts written in an academic framework more effective than AmbienCR™ for inducing sleep. But most of us are interested in people and how they lived, loved, and worked compared to our own lives.

Much has been written and said about this book (it is a Pulitzer prize winner and the author has been awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom for this and his other non-fiction books) so I will just say that it is one of the best non-fiction works I have read for many years and once began, I could not put it down. Along the way the reader also learns about the crucial events that led to the founding of this country and about the people who risked all for the “American experiment” – most especially John Adams who also became the nation’s second President.

The author, David McCullough, includes whole sections of letters written from not just Adams (although he was probably the most prolific letter writer in America at the time) but from other important people as well. Adams’ letters, both personal to his wife Abigail and the other members of his family, and political, to his fellow Federalists and Republicans, provide a penetrating insight into his thinking about a wide variety of topics. I found especially interesting the religious views and theology (or, as John Adams and his contemporaries would say, “philosophy”) of Adams and some of his friends (Jefferson, Washington, Franklin to name just a few).

In not one of Adams’ letters quoted by McCullough was Jesus Christ mentioned by name (and only one entry regarding Christianity is in McCullough’s extensive index and that was Jefferson’s objections to Christianity). Adams’, and many of his New England cohorts, attended the Congregational Church which dated back to the Pilgrim fathers (c.1620). The Congregational Church had no binding creed and was more interested in promoting the social gospel (good deeds using Christ as the behavioral model) than Jesus’ true gospel of salvation by grace alone with works flowing naturally out of love for what He accomplished for us on the cross; namely, our eternal salvation.

Most all acknowledged the existence of God (the “divine Workman”, etc.), but believed (remember, we were founded during the period of the so-called “Enlightenment”) in the power of human reason to improve upon the religious, political, and educational doctrines of the “former times.” There is constant reference to the importance of “good character and reputation” (especially from Adams to his sons) and of the paramount importance of integrity and “hard work”.

All this with the apparent hope that God would approve this behavior and reward individuals accordingly. There seems to be very little understanding of original sin and the reality of the total depravity of man. So it is little wonder that many did not dwell on Jesus as Savior, especially the Jesus who was so horribly crucified as a result of our sins. Not surprisingly, by 1800, most Congregational churches had further degenerated into Unitarianism and in recent years to modernism amounting to outright atheism.

This book can truly be called an epic because of the sweep of its narrative covering everything from the way people dressed and traveled to the major political events of our nation's founding. Highly recommended, even if you are not a history major.

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